FROM LONDON to the GDR

Symbols and clothing in East German punk

By: Kate Gerrard

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The transnational phenomenon of punk appeared in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the late 1970s. From around 1978 the music, images and fashion of punk (particularly that of the UK) found their way into the GDR through Western radio, television and printed media, like much of western pop culture before it. However, unlike the western pop and youth cultures that preceded punk, such as rock and roll and beat music, punk gained neither any degree of state legitimacy nor widespread popularity within a GDR society tuned to Western radio, the reception of which the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands - Socialist Union Party of East Germany) recognized it was powerless to stop by the 1970s. Throughout its existence in the GDR, punk was criminalized by the state, with young punks –sometimes as young as fourteen - finding themselves imprisoned, conscripted to the NVA (Nationale Volksarmee - National People's Army) or exiled in the West. The scene thus remained small and self-contained; the Stasi estimated in 1981 that there were around 1,000 punks, with 10,000 'punk sympathizers."[1] This paper focuses on the initial wave of East German punk, from its inception from around 1978, until 1983, the year of a Stasi operation to destroy the scene, which removed many punks of that generation, but failed to stall punk completely.

Despite its criminalization, manifested through state pressure and Stasi infiltration, punk endured, becoming a highly visible aspect 'of the GDRs streetscape'[2] throughout the 1980s, and continuing to cause a 'living affront to the cosmetic, bland facade of public culture'[3] until it outlived the state itself. To the authorities punk presented a challenge to the entire socialist project, the foundation of which lay in the formation of 'socialist personalities', which sought to instill ideology in young people to enable them to take the socialist endeavour into the future, ensuring its long-term success and sustainability.

Not only did punk present a challenge to authority and the very idea of socialism itself but, as in Britain, wider society responded to punk's provocation. Punks' direc-

tionless rebellion was not only a reaction to political structures at a macro level but also against school, parents, work, indigenous bands who produced music within the state's guidelines (so-called *Staat-rockers*) and youth organizations, many of whom participated in the structures of the socialist state and thereby contributed to the goals of socialism, albeit to differing extents and levels of commitment and enthusiasm, as

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historians such as Mary Fulbrook have argued. However, it would be wrong to conclude that there were no levels of integration by punks at all – there are accounts of punks at youth clubs or taking part in sporting teams – but particularly in the early period punks were often subjected to violent attacks and social alienation. This was in part due to their own willful negation, which saw them isolate themselves not just from the authorities and those they interacted with daily, but also other subcultures. This was particularly apparent in the mid-1980s when, under the protection of the churches, punks struggled – or rather, refused - to co-exist with other oppressed subcultures such as hippies, blues freaks, and the burgeoning reform movement. Further, the pressure put on punks by the authorities by no means engendered a sense of solidarity amongst punks themselves; the scene was marked by stratification, and violence between punks occurred based on where you were from, what you were wearing and how authentic you appeared.

Although the scene remained underground – gigs and gatherings were held in private spaces, until they found shelter through the protection of the church in the early to mid 1980s – punk clothing and its associated symbols immediately, unmistakably and irrevocably conferred an attitude that was against authority, promoting anarchy, individualism, chaos, disorder and freedom of expression. It thereby stood counter to the SED's collectivist paternalism and its desire for young people to embody the 'socialist personality.' Further, it was contrary to the state's understanding of artistic and creative endeavor as fulfilling an ideological function, adhering to the doctrine of 'socialist realism' - that art should reflect the workers' struggle - and understanding of music as a way to transmit an 'optimistic experience of life.'[4] This doctrine viewed 'artistic subjectivity and fantasy, experiments in form, and a pessimistic view of history... as destructive and bourgeois.'[5] Punk, with its loud, aggressive, discordant and confrontational music and an aesthetic based on provocative symbols, text and do-it-yourself self-expression,

was contrary to this artistic ideal in almost every conceivable way. No clearer was this exhibited than in modes of punk dress; torn clothing, straight legged jeans, leather jackets, short dyed hair, safety pins, military boots, daubed slogans, band names and symbols, which immediately denoted disengagement from the collectivist ideal, and, to paraphrase punk progenitors Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's 1974 t-shirt, clearly showed which side of the bed you were lying on.

Becoming punk

What punk clothing signified was not merely listening to decadent Western music, which had been the basis for the SED's objections to Western youth culture since the GDR's inception, but young people coming into the open and 'living it.' The style of punk, its torn clothing, offensive and provocative symbols and slogans such as 'go and fuck you' painted on clothing[6] conferred not just the enjoyment of a certain type of music, but an adherence to a lifestyle that was not just contrary to the ideology of the SED state but willfully disengaged from its aims and structure at all levels.

For some young people, punk connected with their sense of alienation, anger and disillusionment with the SED regime. As punks in the UK railed against a perception of having 'no future', punks in the GDR railed against what they perceived as 'too much future,' to use Henryk Gericke's term.[7] The prescribed nature of life in the GDR and lack of individual choice in education, career direction and even leisure time left young people such as Gericke horrified at the prospect of a 'fixed and foreclosed CV', determined in advance and almost in absentia.[8] The restrictions of socialism were not merely political or geographical: they permeated every aspect of young people's lives. Consequently, some of those that felt they were themselves creative, curious, imaginative or merely hyperactive, were unwilling to even tacitly accept or participate in the way of life within the GDR.

The punk look can be difficult to define due to its combination of creativity and sartorial freedom, with subcultural unifor-

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mity. Punk fashion in the GDR was more experimental in its early years, an approximate equivalent of early UK punks' plundering of 'the vaults of British youth sub-cultural style'[9] exemplified by its 'chaos of quiffs and leather jackets, brothel creepers and winkle pickers, plimsolls and paka macs, moddy crops and skinhead strides, drainpipes and vivid sock bum freezers and bovver boots – all kept 'in place'... by the spectacular adhesives: the safety pins and plastic clothes pegs, the bondage straps and bits of string.'[10] GDR punk later became 'more uniform, with military trousers, paratrooper boots from the West [and] leather jackets,'[11] reflecting in part the violence inherent in the East German scene, but also the propensity of subcultures to develop stricter rules and practices over time. Punk clothing was also subject to rapid change at an individual level, as East Berlin Punk Pankow says '[t]o stand still equalled death. Punks turned into New Romantics or skinheads overnight.'[12]

A 1980 photograph outside Pankower Youth Club shows the punk trends of straight-legged trousers, short cropped hair, leather jackets, badges, and the ubiquitous anarchy symbol.[13] Other shots of individual punks demonstrate a less uniform version of clothing, for example a 1981 Helga Paris photo shows East Berlin punk "Colonel"

in a checked suit and brothel creepers.[14] Other punks wear mesh tops, leopard skin tights, studded wristbands, padlocks and chains round their necks, and earrings.[15] Hair, as Daniel Kaiser describes 'had to be short and upright!,'[16] and was sometimes fashioned into a mowhawk or dyed. A significant amount of time was spent perfecting the punk look, as Liepzig punk Bernd Stracke says; '[w]e worked so hard to look punk that we were almost trendy. We made a big effort over our outfits.'[17] The importance of clothing can also be seen in the practice of 'plucking' where punks deemed inauthentic, known as 'plastics', were robbed of their clothing by those who considered themselves to be authentic, usually punks from East Berlin. This was a particular problem for visiting 'provincial' punks such as Stracke from Leipzig, who says 'when you went to the Plänterwald [a favorite hangout of East German punks], you came home in your undershirt.'[18]

As in the UK, East German punk was a reaction in part against 'against a society of lack, equally under-equipped with material goods as well as fundamental freedom.'[19] This lack of material goods was apparent in the state provision of clothing in the GDR. Although a central tenet of the socialist system was to meet the 'basic needs' of the population in line with Marxist-Leninist doctrine[20] - and indeed it was for this reason that the SED saw no place for punk in the GDR, with its roots in imperialistic Western culture suffering mass unemployment[21] of which there was technically none in East Germany - the SED consistently struggled to meet the consumer, clothing and fashion needs and wants of the population.[22] Thus GDR citizens made up for government shortfalls with a combination of a 'make-do and mend' culture, clothes sent over from relatives in the west, and, where they could afford to do so, purchased clothes from state-run high-end shops such as Exsquisit, Delicat, or Intershops.[23]

The rejection, indeed destruction, of SED provided fashion and the creation of individual style was also an implicit rejection of the SED and what it could provide.

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Punks rebelled against 'boring and unacceptable so-called "youth fashion"' and forged an alternative way of dressing.[24] Furthermore, the do-it-yourself ethos of punk lent itself to a population used to supplementing available clothing, and made up for the unavailability of 'punk' items in clothing shops. One East German punk says 'since we could not go to a punk boutique, we used quite a lot of handicrafts and even developed our own ideas.'[25] Punks sourced clothing from parents' wardrobes, clothing packages sent over from western relatives or swapped clothes with each other.[26] Just as it was necessary for the wider population to produce their own clothing to make up for shortages, punks had to find ways of creating outfits. As a result '[a]t the beginning, as in other countries too, [punk] was very experimental.'[27]

For many, punk was a way in which to express discontentment with life in the GDR and for some it was the visual aspect of punk that provided the impetus. The sneering, snotty and provocative look and attitude of punk from the UK, connected with young people who were frustrated, angry and bored. On seeing Johnny Rotten on the cover of the West German youth magazine Bravo, Michael 'Pankow' Boehlke 'ripped

up his jeans right then and there,' Rotten's look and demeanor resonating with Boehlke's anger with his parents, school and the state.[28]

For others the experience was less immediate and extreme, but no less profound. Henyrk Gericke describes the impact of seeing a picture of King's Road punks in *Die Trommel*, the newspaper of the GDR Pioneer Organisation *Ernst Thälmann,* in an article intended to dissuade young people from the ways of punk:
'[t]his photo has triggered pretty much everything that happened to me later on. It did put me off somehow, but in a way this irresistibly attracted me to it.[29] For Gericke punk seemed like the 'the landing of aliens' bringing color to the anaemic East, coupled with energetic music that blew 'away the rock ballads of accepted East German music.'[30]

The influence of British punk is very apparent in the East German punk scene. British punk found its way over the Berlin Wall via radio, particularly John Peel's weekly program on the British Forces Broadcasting Service, and stations such as Radio in the American Sector and Radio Luxembourg,[31] in addition to coverage in magazines and newspapers in both East and West Germany, as seen above. Although US bands were popular amongst punks, in their mode of dress many 'wanted to look like Johnny Rotten, or the Clash or the Damned.'[32] This influence is obvious in the straight legged jeans, leather jackets, badges and chains worn by GDR punks, but also in names of bands such as the UK Subs and Sex Pistols which appear painted on clothing.[33] The direct influence is also apparent in photos such as that of Weimar's *Madmen*, where one of their members wears a t-shirt with the phrase 'Ich hasse Pink Floyd', a direct reference to Johnny Rotten's self-created 'I hate Pink Floyd' t-shirt.[34]

As well as rebelling against acceptable modes of dress and to a lesser extent, sartorial provision, punk clothing was an integral part of constructing a new identity.[35] As commentators on British punk such as David Muggleton have argued, punk should

not merely be seen as a rebellion against macro-historical circumstances but also as an impetus to experimentation with and the expression of identity. [36] Becoming punk was not merely adopting an 'off-the-peg' image, particularly for East German punks who had to create the punk look from what they could find and make themselves. As a punk in the UK, Frank Cartledge has described his own assimilation of punk fashion as a 'fractured and chaotic assembly of an identity' that involved experimentation with clothing and hairstyle over a period of time.[37] This can also be applied in the case of East German punks, who saw in punk not only a vehicle for the expression of directionless political discontentment but also a form in which to forge their own sense of identity according to their own terms. As Pankow puts it, how 'you composed yourself started with your style[38] and the destruction-creativity dynamic of punk lent itself to the de- and reconstruction of identity, embodied in what you called yourself, what you wore and how you behaved. This can be seen in the tearing up of clothing and pinning it back together, and the number of punks who changed their names: Mario Schulz became Colonel, Michael Boehlke became Pankow (and both are still known by those names today), and other punks adopted alternative names such as Major, Fatzo and N.

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By dressing and behaving outside of the prescribed norms of the GDR, young people accessed a sense of release – tem-

porarily at least – from their perception of 'too much future' within the physical boundaries of East German state. Punks such as Gericke 'were no longer GDR citizens, [they] behaved as if they were in London and had fled the country though still being present within it,'[39] although this sense of escape could not conceivably last long under the watchful eyes of the police and Stasi. For punk and artist Cornelia Schleime, whose artistic ambitions were curtailed by her reluctance to adhere to socialist realism, punk facilitated a way to distance 'yourself from the present, fight against it and change yourself.'[40] This release also came simply through having fun, forging friendships, and generally 'running wild.' [41] Despite being later arrested and suffering a breakdown, Planlos drummer Mita Schamal, says of her days as a punk; 'you left your parents house and finally it was clear... you were going to have some fun.'[42]

Anarchy in the GDR

A consistent feature in punk clothing is the anarchy symbol, standing for 'not Anarchy, but chaos.'[43] The anarchy symbol is apparent across a range of photography from this period; it is worn on badges, painted on clothing, it appears on walls, a 1980 photo shows a punk with it painted on his cheek.[44] In the UK the designs of Westwood and McLaren threw together a confusion and profusion of symbolism to demystify their meaning; for example their 1977 anarchy shirt displayed anarchy symbols, swastikas, pictures of Karl Marx and Mao Zedong alongside nudie playing cards,[45] confusing associated meaning by displaying several contradictory symbols at once. As Sex Pistols graphic designer Jamie Reid says '[i]n the same week we would be accused, quite seriously, of being National Front, and in the next breath you were made communists and anarchists.'[46] Although there are some recorded instances of a profusion of images and slogans by East German punks (Pankow describes wearing a t shirt with an 'RAF logo, machine gun [and] yellow star armband' alongside the Rosa Luxembourg slogan 'when justice becomes injustice resistance becomes a duty', for which

he was promptly interrogated by police[47]), the anarchy symbol often appears in singular use, allowing it to retain its meaning of chaos, disorder, individualism and the rejection of authority[48] - all of which stood contrary to the aims of the SED state, not merely at a political level, but on a social level as well.

One of the most shocking symbols used by British punks, and US proto-punks such as the New York Dolls, was the swastika and other Nazi insignia. This use of highly provocative symbolism proved shocking to both the British media and that of West Germany, being featured in magazines such as *Stern,* which showed in its 1977 coverage a punk at London's Roxy Club wearing a Nazi shirt with leather trousers.[49] However, in the photos and testimony of East German punks, the swastika hardly features at all. This was in part because use of the fascist symbol was simply too dangerous in a state which had founded itself on the ashes of National

Socialism and saw itself as contrary to its West German neighbor, who it accused of retaining many former Nazis in high level official positions. Indeed, the Berlin Wall was consistently defended by the East German government as an 'anti-fascist barrier' and one of their long running objections to western music was that it made young people 'prone to fascist seduction.'[50] Further, unlike UK punks, this generation of East Germans still had familial links to Germany's Nazi past and had a more complex relationship with their 'war generation' who were not characterized by a heroic collective spirit and for surviving on rations, but for fighting on the side of fascism. Uwe, a punk featured in a 1983 Observer article exemplifies this point when talking about his outfit, his trousers having belonged to his grandfather who was in the Nazi SS (*Schutzstaffel*, Protection Squadron). He says of him 'they hanged him too, the Nazi shite.'[51]

Although the SED state consistently and vehemently opposed fascism, far right extremism in the GDR was seen as 'a less serious threat' than the punk scene and thereby afforded greater tolerance by the regime.[52] It was not until violence erupted between the two groups at the Berlin Zionkirche in October 1987 that a concerted crackdown on far-right skinheads began.[53] Seemingly, the anarchic nature of punk was more threatening to the SED regime, since it was a way of life based on chaotic individualism and anti-authority, and as such not contained within an ideological framework on the political spectrum. Punk's willful individualism and political non-alignment was perceived by the state to be as much of a threat as its 'traditional' far right enemy.

This political non-alignment also worked the other way, and there are far less references to socialist figures or symbols than use of the anarchy symbol or references to British bands. One example is the 1982 photo of Weimar's Madmen, where the guitarist is wearing a *Freie Deutsche Jugend* (Free German Youth, the East German youth organsiation) shirt, unbuttoned to the waist, teamed with sunglasses and jeans

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with turn-ups.[54] However, generally inversion of socialist symbols of iconography is not a prevalent trend in East German punk – rather their symbols and references denote detachment and disengagement with traditional political structures and ideology.

Symbols and clothing in early East German punk were provocative and rebellious by their very nature, and it was for this reason that they appealed to many young people in East Germany who were bored, angry and frustrated by life in the GDR. Punk facilitated the expression of discontentment and anger, under the umbrella of a chaotic and shifting subculture. It explicitly signified a disengagement and contempt for the state and its socialist aims. Punk was appealing due to the political circumstances in the GDR, felt by individuals on a daily basis, on a very personal level. The subsequent reaction of the state necessarily politicized punk, but the motivation for becoming punk was not necessarily political in a directional or oppositional sense.[55] What should be considered in equal weight is punks' facilitation in the construction of identity, based on individualism, freedom of expression, destroying the old and creating something new. Furthermore, punk clothing signified a refusal to engage in the SED's socialist project but also, at a personal level, it allowed young people to express themselves sartorially, artistically and musically, which in itself was rebellious and provocative in the eyes of the state. Through punk young people could access a sense of freedom, escape

and quite simply, fun, even if in reality this would be short-lived under the pressure of state and Stasi repercussions.

Endnotes

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